

Blessed are the Merciful

Matthew 9:9-13, Luke 18:9-14, Matthew 5:7

Since we are talking about mercy today, I thought I'd begin with a story about a young pastor who noted as he was looking out into the congregation that the bishop was in attendance at his morning service. After the service was over, the minister was shaking hands as the bishop was coming through the line. The pastor asked: "How did you like my sermon, Bishop," "Young man, it was like the peace and mercy of God," replied the bishop. "Really", the pastor said: "What do you mean?" "Well, "It was like God's peace because it passed all human understanding and it was like God's mercy because I thought it would endure forever." I hope you won't feel that way this after today's sermon.

Actually, we are looking at the words of one the greatest sermons ever preached. They are the words of our Lord identified as the Sermon on the Mount. The beginning of that sermon is called the Beatitudes which we have called God's kingdom principles for living. They describe for us a reality not only for what we would dream of the world to be, but also a challenge for us to put our faith into action that we could capture a sense of what Jesus' words were all about in the Lord's prayer: "Thy Kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Today we look at the Beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy." A blessing that comes from the outward expression of our faith...being a person who will show mercy to others. I guess you have to say that is not the typical kind of behavior we often see in this world. Rather than showing mercy, we are more inclined to judge. Rather than demonstrating a heart of mercy, we often see attitudes of self-interest, or arrogance, or attacking one another. And maybe that's why these kingdom principles can be hard for us to hear. They seem to run counter to the ways of this world. That to be a follower of Jesus Christ calls me to look at life differently. "Blessed are the merciful."

It only makes sense that this should be our mandate when we consider our condition and position before an almighty God. That we assert and believe that the God we worship is a God of mercy. This is how the apostle Paul describes it in Ephesians 2: "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world"...but he goes on to say: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ..." Our

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standing before God has been radically changed, not by our human effort, but by God's great mercy. Last week's beatitude spoke of our hunger for righteousness, that we could be in a right relationship with God...and what is required is to come in a spirit of humility and receive the love and forgiveness of a God of mercy.

This Sunday is known as Reformation Sunday and this year the Church is commemorating 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany that symbolized the beginning of the reformation. The significance of that event was a new emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and the importance of one's individual faith experience. The key verse that highlighted the reformation movement was simply this from Romans: "The righteous shall live by faith." That the basis of my righteousness is the righteousness of Jesus Christ and the door has been opened to be in a right relationship with God. A right relationship made possible because of God's great mercy and grace. I like how both grace and mercy have sometimes been defined: "Grace is when God gives us what we don't deserve and Mercy is when God doesn't give us what we do deserve."

You remember the problem of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. Righteousness for them had become a matter of human achievement...who could follow the law most strictly, who could prove their worth by not only living by such high standards, but judging others who they thought had fallen short. And so their righteousness became a self-righteousness.

And when Jesus told the parable we heard read from Luke 18, it must have hit the Pharisees hard. The Pharisee and tax collector go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee in an attitude of spiritual pride prays: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people...or even like this tax collector." And he begins to list his spiritual accomplishments. But the tax collector in a spirit of humility simply prays: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus uses this parable to teach us the importance of living in that posture of humbly receiving the mercy of God.

In a small cemetery of a parish churchyard in Olney, England, stands a granite tombstone with this inscription: "John Newton, clerk [pastor], once an infidel & Libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long labored to destroy." You

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may not remember his name, but all of us know the song he wrote as a testimony of his life: "Amazing Grace."

It is God's mercy that becomes the basis for our being merciful to others. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. We are truly blessed when we can live in that spirit for it is then that we recognize what God has done for us. We are recipients of God's love and grace. A grace he has opened to us in Jesus Christ.

If you heard Pastor HeyYoung's sermon last weekend, you heard that this word Blessed is not just about a condition we receive, but it is a call to action. She explained the Aramaic translation of this word for Blessed as "Get up". In other words, as we have received God's mercy we are to get up and be merciful. It is not a passive state, but rather a call to show mercy to others. It was the lesson Jesus was teaching as he called his disciples. Matthew is called: "Follow me." (Maybe it could be understood as "Get up...and follow me) And then Jesus is at a dinner with tax collectors and sinners. Possibly Matthew had invited his tax collector friends to his home. And as the Pharisees watched in judgment they ask: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered them: "Healthy people don't need a doctor, sick people do...Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: I want you to show mercy not offer sacrifices. For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know that they are sinners." That more important than following all the laws was having this attitude of a humble spirit and showing mercy to others.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." This was the life of the early Methodists. You remember this Spring we talked about how Wesley emphasized the means of grace as both works of piety and works of mercy. Where God does a work in our hearts and gives us a new perspective about those around us. That our relationship with God moves us from works of piety (like prayer and Bible study, and worship) to works of mercy. Demonstrating our faith by how we care for others. This is the invitation of our Lord and a call to live by. That we would look for ways in our everyday life to live in the spirit of being merciful.

Vinita Wright who is a senior editor for Loyola Press wrote some helpful and profound words in an article entitled: What does everyday mercy look like? I love how they give insightful expression on how we can be people of mercy. So I like to share part of that article with you: "As I move through this day, how will I live mercifully? What words and actions will express to others around me (mercy). In a given day, I do

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ordinary things, and I traverse a fairly unexciting landscape. My mercy will not show up in grand gestures, and most of the time mercy reveals itself in fleeting moments. For example, mercy gives you his seat on the bus, acting as if he was about to get up anyway rather than making you feel that he is doing you a favor. Mercy does not let out that sigh -- you know the one -- the wordless disapproval toward the person in the check-out line ahead of you whose card didn't swipe, or who can't find her coupons, or whose toddler is having a meltdown. Mercy offers quiet sympathy and does not convey with her body language that this holdup is ruining her day. Sometimes mercy chooses not to send back the food that isn't just right, simply because the waitress looks overwhelmed. When mercy has been wronged, the offended one does not make it difficult for the offender to apologize or ask forgiveness. In fact, mercy does not wait for the other's action but forgives so quickly that the person needing forgiveness is freer to ask for it. Likewise, at work, at home or in the classroom, mercy creates an atmosphere in which a person feels safe enough to admit his mistake or ask a question. And if mercy must correct someone, it pains her to do it, and she does so gently, without vindictive relish. Mercy makes a habit of giving others the benefit of the doubt. Mercy is not in the habit of sending deadly glares at people who are annoying. Mercy gives charitably, knowing that eventually someone will take advantage of his generosity. Mercy welcomes you, fully aware that this act may disrupt her own plans. Mercy relinquishes control when doing so allows another person to grow and learn. Mercy makes it his business to help others succeed. Mercy clears the way for others, so that they can walk on an even path, no matter how halting their steps or injured their souls. In all these situations, mercy treats power as a sacred trust. I can be merciful because I have some sort of power, the means to affect another's life, if only for a moment. I act mercifully when I use my power to do kindness in this world.”*

Well, you and I live in a world that desperately needs this posture of mercy. So much of our everyday world runs counter to this attitude of this kind of behavior. But as a follower of Jesus Christ we seek to live a different life, to follow these kingdom principles. And so we can be blessed, blessed in the assurance of God's great love and mercy. Blessed when we consider how rich God's mercy is toward us and blessed when we take the

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steps to “get up” and follow Jesus and put our faith into action and show mercy to all of God’s children.

*National Catholic Reporter Aug. 26, 2014